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Skip Bell  
*Andrews University*

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**Skip Bell, DMin**, is professor of Christian leadership and director of the Doctor of Ministry program, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



# The pastor: *Forming a shared vocational vision*

**W**ho defines the vocational vision for pastoral ministry? Is it the employing denomination? Is it the congregation the pastor serves? Is it the church board? Is it the demand of the moment—preaching, evangelism, mission, church planting? Is it the Great Commission? Or is it the One who gives the commission?

The purpose of this article is to discover a biblical foundation for a pastoral vision. Such a foundation offers the hope of transcending differing perspectives while relating to the various expectations of the church and broader community. Articulating a biblical vision for the pastor is an ambitious undertaking. Perhaps a good place to begin is to look at the relationship between Paul, the seasoned apostle, and Timothy, a developing pastoral leader. But first, some thoughts on developing the vocational vision of the pastor.

## Forming the vocational vision of the pastor

In the world of business, every aspiring business leader needs to possess a mental image of what the organization exists to do, why it matters, and how their endeavors help the organization thrive.<sup>1</sup> Only such a vision can make the business prosper. Pastors, too, must possess a mental image of what they ought to do and how they will

do it if they are to be effective in their ministry or leadership.

How does a pastor arrive at the right mental image regarding a biblical vision for ministry? The answer is complicated. To be sure, a pastor has prayed over a sense of calling and struggled with his or her vocational decision. Usually this search and the struggle go on in the context of a faith community that has contributed to the pastor's spiritual development. Any faith community has certain traditions that influence ministry models, and those may or may not be biblically formed.

What a beginning pastor believes he or she is called to be and do is heavily influenced by the early years of vocational employment. That experience generally trumps Scripture. So what starts as a personal calling advances to professional employment extended by the church organization with concurrent, conflicting models.

Seminary life and study are intended to biblically shape one's worldview, vocational vision, and ministry practice. But the seminary is not the only institutional factor shaping vocational vision. Indeed, some pastors may bypass seminary altogether. A church organization may envision ministry in very concrete terms such as baptisms or tithing, which may reflect positively on mission but often leads to numerical and result-oriented thinking about ministry. In such a culture,

biblical dimensions of discipleship often retreat to the background.

Church organizational leaders and seminary professors share the same responsibility, to reflect on a biblical vision for pastoral ministry. Church organizations form internships, field education, voice ministry priorities, and deliver ongoing professional growth activity. More to the point, the pastors' initial ministry experiences shape their vocational vision, and as they struggle to make sense of them, they either internalize or shed lessons they learned in seminary.

From my experience with pastoral interns and seminarians, I have found that a crucial part of their formation involves sorting out which mental models of pastoral ministry are legitimate and which they will discard. To be at peace with their calling, pastors must ultimately understand their calling within their relationship with God. Some agonize with the leading of the Spirit in the direction of biblical service while they compromise with the realities of their career. Choosing to follow where Christ leads rather than protecting career interests is the secret of sacrificial service and Christlike formation of vocational vision. But that does not come easily.

## Pastoral vision and the church

Important as the question of vocational vision may be, the first and

foremost question in pastoral vision should be our understanding of ecclesiology, soteriology, and missiology of the church. The nature of pastoral ministry corresponds to beliefs about the church. Paul defines the church as “God’s household, . . . the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).<sup>2</sup> Pastoral ministry’s action words—nourish, lead, protect, seek, know—emerge from how pastors relate to the church, and they are couched in such biblical metaphors as the flock, household, vineyard, or body. The meaning of pastoral ministry does not rest in the actions of such ministry, the practice in relation to the church, but in the nature of the church itself.

ministry. Creating church community is the starting point for the vocational vision of pastoral ministry. Biblical narratives and tenets of the church provide the right foundation for constructing a pastor’s vocational vision and must accompany a pastor’s lifelong formation.

The following seven elements illustrate themes of a biblical vision of pastoral ministry. They emerge from the nature of the church and are noted in Paul’s letter to Timothy.

*1. Pastoral vocation and the commission.* The heart of pastoral vocation is calling others to become disciples of Christ. The mission of the church is to make disciples, and a pastor lives out this central theme in his or her voca-

the church requires true discipleship formation. Disciples are responsible, maturing, reproducing members of the body of Christ with lives marked by spiritual growth. All pastoral practices such as missional activity, nurture, worship, building small-group structures, corporate governance, or networking with other organizations contribute to discipleship formation when meaningfully approached and sustained. Forming disciples is the vocation of the pastor. Any other purpose is a distraction.

Paul admonished Timothy to focus on spirituality in his own experience and among those he served. Such spirituality means to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance

*Choosing to follow where Christ leads rather than protecting career interests is the secret of sacrificial service and Christlike formation of vocational vision.*

Our concern here is not the existence of varying models of the church from which the pastor will have to make a choice, but the fact remains that some enter ministry with little or no opportunities for reflection of that choice. It is so crucial and cannot be minimized in understanding the essence of biblical pastoral leadership and the creation of church community. Pastors attend to gathering the church, developing the culture of the church, and celebrating covenant practices. These themes of the church give structure to a pastor’s vocational vision.

Too often, once a pastor is engaged in a parish assignment, little time or effort is given to the reflection of a biblical model of the church and

tion. Paul urged Timothy, “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2).

God seeks the salvation of all humankind. Hence the primary mission of the church is to be used by God to make disciples. Pastors embody this vision in their view of the world. Paul speaks of God as one “who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). He urges Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5). Whatever else we believe about pastoring, disciple making lies at the core.

*2. Pastoral vocation and the forming of disciples.* A biblical vision for building

and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Tim. 6:11, 12). He urges Timothy to reproduce discipleship: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2). The common theme of discipleship must knit together the purposes behind all activity in pastoral life.

*3. Pastoral vocation and worship.* Worship flows from and shapes our discipleship, and pastors guide the art of worship as one contribution to discipleship. A personal devotional life, private and public prayer, corporate worship, Communion, baptisms, weddings, and dedications all form meanings and relationships. A pastor promotes

worship practices in coherence with the calling and shared meanings of a community of disciples.

The church is drawn to worship when it comes together. Paul envisions Timothy's ministry as helping believers know how they "ought to conduct themselves in God's household" (1 Tim. 3:15). A pastor's vocation provides biblical guidance in implementation of worship in a worshipping community. Paul admonishes Timothy to serve in a manner that assures these services will be entered into with faith and love (2 Tim. 1:13, 14).

*4. Pastoral vocation and theological reflection.* A further essential element of pastoral vocation is forming disciples who can practice theological reflection as they experience their faith lives. If pastors fail to foster biblically grounded theological reflection, flawed paradigms of discipleship and ministry may form. Paul warns that without appropriate theological reflection some will "devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith" (1 Tim. 1:3, 4).

Paul urges Timothy to be a devoted student of Scripture, affirming that the scriptures "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). Paul's concern is that Timothy become a student of Scripture and one who leads others to the study of Scripture (vv. 14–16). A pastor's primary vocation is disciple making, in which all new disciples will commit themselves to theological reflection and biblical faithfulness even as they live in cultural diversity and social plurality. A disciple committed to the study and demands of the Word will not let cultural diversity interfere in enjoying true discipleship with others who are also bound by God's Word.

For too many, pastoral ministry involves a choice between practices and theology. Having been trained in biblical languages, biblical studies, theology, and ministerial competency in the seminary, pastors embark on

years of in-field training focused on ministry, public and personal evangelism, counseling, and the like. While some use theological reflection as a backdrop to the busy life of their parish ministry, others concentrate on the organizational work of the church to the neglect of theological reflection. And still others focus on numerical indicators of productivity and tend to bypass ministry in favor of mission and church growth.

But ministry and pastoral work cannot be so dichotomized. Faithful ministry combines both the theological and the practical, the ministerial as well as pastoral, soul saving with soul conserving. Edward Farley describes the responsibility of pastors to the congregation as both practicing theologians and reflectors of that theology. Theological depth and width, knowledge and application, are at the core of pastoral practice and strength. "If theology names the interpretive life of faith, a thinking of situations under Gospel, and if all believers are in this sense theologians, then church leaders and ministers, as believers, are also theologians."<sup>3</sup>

*5. Pastoral vocation and making meaning.* Pastors help others develop the art of giving meaning to life's situations, both joyful and critical. This is done through reflection on the sacred text, faith traditions, the broader narratives of human proficiency, and spiritually grounded experience. A pastor must be able to interpret his or her own life experience, and then, in turn, develop that practice among parish members. Meaning making is accomplished as pastors develop competencies in listening, conversing, teaching, and preaching.

Paul envisioned disciples who could practice the art of meaning making. Exhorting that believers find joy in a higher purpose than financial gain, he states, "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:6). He urges believers to understand life's challenges and interpret them spiritually. Urging maturity amid the difficulties of life, he counsels, "Pursue

righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Tim. 6:11, 12). Paul acknowledges suffering but expresses hope, confidence, and purpose in the gospel (2 Tim. 1:12; 2:8–11). "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," he declares (2 Tim. 3:12).

*6. Pastoral vocation and building relationships.* A pastor's ministry is relational. Discipleship is essentially a fourfold relationship: upward with God, inward with oneself, and outward with those of one's faith community and with others who are also objects of God's love. If the gospel is to become relevant and meaningful, it must be through visible, caring, relational connections of the entire congregation with the community the church serves. On such a relationship, pastoral vocation must find its sure and certain direction. Paul voices such relational vision for the church: "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing" (1 Tim. 2:8).

Pastors who see their ministry as relational help people form communities whose relational character is thoroughly and visibly shaped by the gospel. They lead the community to experience the fulfillment of God's purpose for them. Such an experience involves talking, exhorting, praying, forgiving, crying, and laughing as a community of redemption.

*7. Pastoral vocation and community leadership.* Finally, the vocational vision of pastors would provide mature, trusted voices of leadership in the community. Such pastors will involve themselves in community life and equip churches to interpret neighborhoods, exploring the economic, social, and political context of their surroundings. They encourage awareness of the historical and biblical narratives that define the vision of the broader community.

Paul sensed this role of the pastor in the community, urging Timothy "that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone"

(1 Tim. 2:1). When envisioning the life of a church leader, Paul urges the leader to “have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Tim. 3:7).

The practice that helps a congregation engage in their broader community begins with surfacing and reflecting on their own corporate stories. As pastors develop and guide in that process, they build congregations that are able to provide community leadership.

## Conclusion: An integrated vocational vision


A vocational vision for the pastor must be biblically grounded. A pastor must sift through the voices endeavoring to define his or her vocational life, opting instead to find meaning in a prayerful, Spirit-led inquiry with Scripture.

Who establishes the vision for the pastor? As servants of God and His

church, the vision of the pastors is identified with and inseparable from the ministry of the church. The vision is voiced in themes such as discipleship, worship, theological reflection, meaning making, relationships, and community leadership. Such a vision establishes the pastoral vocation as vital, integrated throughout God’s redemptive intention in our communities and a challenging ministry. The vocation is expressed in such acts as preaching the Word, leading people to Christ, seeking people for Christ, leading and organizing the local church for mission, protecting, knowing people and their needs, sacrificing for others, and serving.

An integrated vocational vision for pastoral ministry demands *both* prayerful consideration of calling *and* disciplined ongoing formation of professional practice. In the pastoral vocation, calling and professional development are inseparable. God

redeems our time and transforms our lives. Thus, pastoral ministry is not a narrow skill set and cannot be accomplished by commitment alone but is integrated into the demanding and broad set of practices involved in pastoral leadership. Faithful servants of God study to discharge all the duties of ministry (2 Tim. 4:5).

John Piper puts it this way: “The aims of our ministry are eternal and spiritual. They are not shared by any of the professions. It is precisely by the failure to see this that we are dying. . . . The world sets the agenda for the professional man; God sets the agenda for the spiritual man.”<sup>4</sup> 

- 1 Peter F. Drucker, “The Theory of the Business,” *Harvard Business Review* (Sept./Oct. 1994): 95–104, esp. 100.
- 2 All scripture passages are from the New International Version.
- 3 Edward Farley, “Theology in the Life of the Congregation,” in *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 8.
- 4 John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 3.

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# Ministry®

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### Submission requirements

1. Writers must choose a category from the list below for their submission.
  - a. Biblical studies
  - b. Historical studies
  - c. Theological studies (including ethics)
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  - e. World missions
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